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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the role and function of child development/early childhood laboratories and examines the ways in which a laboratory's perspective on role and function may influence policy and practice. Roles are discussed in terms of instruction, service and research. Instruction in the laboratories may include: (1) demonstrating model curricula for pre-service teachers; (2) providing pre-service teachers with the opportunity to observe stages of development, plan and implement case studies, or conduct interviews, and (3) promoting graduate students' professional growth. The service role of laboratories is: (1) to provide child care or early childhood programs for young children and informational sessions for parents and education professionals; (2) to be advocates for child and family issues; and (3) to serve as a liaison or referral source to other human service organizations and agencies. The research function of child development/early childhood laboratories is two-fold: (1) the laboratory is the site for data collection and other primary research activity; and (2) the laboratory facility can be used to demonstrate practical applications of relevant research findings. (RJC)

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DISTINCTIONS IN THE ROLE AND FUNCTION OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT/EARLY CHILDHOOD LABORATORIES

Donna Couchenour and Kent Chrisman

The intent of this paper is to delineate the role and function of child development/early childhood laboratories and to examine ways in which the perspective on role and function may influence policy and practice. Additionally, directions for the future of child development/early childhood laboratories will be considered. A review of the purposes of laboratory schools (Dishner & Boothby, 1986; Howd & Browne, 1970; Hunter, 1970; McPherson & McGee, 1982) and presentations of current trends and issues involving child development laboratory schools (Briggs, Benham & Counselman, 1987) reveal that role and function are generally agreed upon as involving the following: (a) teacher education or instruction; (b) service, at the local, regional and national levels; and (c) educational inquiry or research. The disagreement which is readily apparent, however, centers on the definition of each of the functions and in the emphasis or priority which each of the stated functions should receive.

Certainly the departmental management philosophy governing the child development/early childhood laboratory will impact on the prioritizing of the stated roles. It may be that such a laboratory school located in a College of Education would adopt the primary role of instruction for

teacher education whereas the school in a College of Human Ecology, Home Economics or Arts and Sciences may emphasize the research function. Although there appears to be a relatively clear distinction among the three roles (instruction, service and research), a closer examination of each role will demonstrate some of the subtle distinctions. Such distinctions will be addressed in the next section of this paper.

Child development/early childhood laboratory schools may well be an ideal contemporary setting. If Goodlad's claim (cited in McPherson & McGee, 1982) that a laboratory school should provide "what the rest of American education is not providing" (p. 1021) is legitimate, such schools for early education are certainly justified since a very small percentage of children from birth through age four are served through public schools.

Instruction

Instruction is certainly a primary focus in any laboratory school. Whether the school is a teacher education training ground or an observational setting for human development, instruction at the college level is an undeniable facet of a child development/early childhood laboratory's purpose. In fact, McPherson and McGee (1982) cite evidence for agreement that the primary purpose of early laboratory schools was for future teachers to observe master teachers and to develop their own teaching skills.

As the field of early childhood education struggles towards professionalization (Chrisman & Couchenour, in press; NAEYC, 1984; Radomski, 1986; Silin, 1985), the necessity for highly trained teachers of young children is obvious. No longer can preschool or kindergarten teachers have as their only qualification a "love for little children". Research on quality programs for young children (Powell, 1986; Schweinhart, Weikart & Larner, 1986) points to a definite need for the education of teachers to include information and examples of developmentally appropriate curriculum and practice (NAEYC, 1986). The child development/early childhood laboratory provides an excellent opportunity for the demonstration of model curricula for pre-service teachers.

As the need for professionals in all human service fields increases (Naisbitt, 1982), the need for an understanding of human development, from infancy through late adulthood becomes imperative. Students who participate in directed observation in laboratories gain invaluable information about stages of development and may have the opportunity to plan and implement interviews or detailed observations and case studies with individuals or small groups of children. The purpose of this instruction differs from the training involved in teacher education; thus, policy and practice in the laboratory setting will be influenced by one or both of these directions for instruction.

A child development/early childhood laboratory at a comprehensive university also has a function related to graduate education. Typically, the role of the graduate student, as a graduate teaching assistant, in the laboratory is that of a lead teacher or a member of a teaching team. Whereas this practice benefits the laboratory program by having an experienced or mature teacher on the floor, the instructional function of the laboratory in graduate education is frequently ignored. In order to fulfill this aspect of the instructional role, it is important that the university instructional program address the professional growth of such graduate students. Administrative bodies of contemporary laboratories would do well to examine Dewey's (1902) idea that such schools should be an educational training ground for leaders in education as opposed to training only conventional teachers.

Asking graduate students to submit their educational goals to a committee and then having the committee suggest ways in which the laboratory experience can contribute to such goals has been found to be an initial way to address the graduate education function. The authors are familiar with several situations in which prospective graduate students have been advised to reject offers of assistantships in laboratories due to the amount of time required in a labor intensive position, the lack of flexible hours for course scheduling, and the problem associated with the lack of professional growth opportunities that exist

when students have the same job responsibilities as they might in an entry level position. Laboratories must periodically evaluate their instructional function in the realm of graduate education. As many teacher education programs evolve into fifth year programs (Moran, 1988), for state certification requirements, attention to this aspect of the instructional function becomes even more critical.

Application of the aforementioned notions would demonstrate that laboratories should be in the forefront of new directions in early childhood education and child development theory and research as well as in maintaining and advocating for what is most beneficial for children. Moreover, these laboratories should take the lead in defining concepts, certification and the future of programs for young children. Attention to such innovation and invention implies that the laboratory will not be stable in terms of programming, staffing arrangements or priorities, but rather will act through scientific inquiry to provide leadership in both the scholarly and service functions. Consistency, however, must be apparent in developmentally appropriate practice for the children's programs.

Service

Service to the university community, the local community, the region and at a national level is recognized as a legitimate function of a child development/early childhood laboratory. The practical aspects of the service

function include providing child care and/or early childhood programs for young children, scheduling parent education seminars and other family services, conducting professional workshops and in-service sessions for local early childhood personnel, serving as a student teaching site for state certification requirements, and administering teacher/parent resource centers. Additionally, dissemination of current information through national professional organizations is a critical aspect of the service function of a child development/early childhood laboratory facility.

Whereas the characteristics of the service function seem to be clear in the list of service possibilities, the obscuring of this function is apparent in a day-to-day operation of a laboratory facility. Emphasis on service to the families of the local community may place severe limitations on the quantity and quality of resources that remain for meeting the state, regional and national obligations. It has been noted by the authors that even though administrators of laboratory facilities have academic appointments similar to many of their clientele, confusion about the service function is sometimes difficult to resolve. Campuses which provide child care for students, staff and faculty members in a facility which is separate from the campus laboratory associated with an academic department find an increased service function less perplexing.

If service is indeed to extend beyond the campus and local communities, it is then imperative that the administration of the laboratory and of the governing department/college communicate this to the prospective clientele. Many families will support the notion that they and their children are contributing to such worthy endeavors while at the same time they are benefiting from a high quality early childhood education experience. A delicate balance in the service function is required; high quality programs to meet the needs of families must not be sacrificed in order to meet the larger scale service goals. As a matter of fact, McPherson and McGee (1982) believe that such quality is the primary requirement for the continued existence of laboratories.

University faculty and staff members who are associated with laboratories frequently find that they are deluged with requests to provide workshops and interest sessions within their communities or states. Since educational institutions and child care facilities are not typically provided with unlimited financial resources, the laboratory faculty/staff members understand that such consultations will be without remuneration and thus considered to be service to the particular group. Early childhood professionals face an ethical dilemma that revolves around their commitment as opposed to their financial resources. One practice which seems to be an acceptable compromise to this dilemma is for the laboratory faculty/staff to plan on-site conferences

geared to meet needs of the local community, region or state. When such events are planned annually, requests for specific topics can be filed and utilized in the conference preparations.

Hunter (1970) discusses the idea of developing an " exportable" product. With technologically advanced communication devices currently available on many campuses, videotaped training materials and teleconferencing are practices which help to conserve human energy and over time will certainly be cost effective.

One of the most critical aspects of the service function is advocacy. Laboratory personnel, with their knowledge base and up-to-date policy information about the state of early childhood education/child study (Goffin, 1988) should be key contacts for legislators and regulatory agencies as they work to create public policy related to child and family issues.

The amount and type of advocacy conducted by the campus laboratory will vary greatly. Variations will be determined by a number of factors such as: (a) involvement in professional organizations; (b) awareness level of laboratory administration on issues in the state, region and nation; (c) availability of literature, statistics and research on advocacy issues; and (d) motivation on the part of the laboratory administration to participate in advocacy issues. Types of advocacy activities in which a laboratory should participate include: convening seminars,

conferences, workshops, on critical issues; providing testimony for hearings, boards, panels, commissions; serving as a resource for statistical data, current documents and policy analysis regarding issues; and active investigation in discovering factual information to add to available data.

A final aspect of the service function relates to the child development/early childhood laboratory as a liaison or referral source to other human service organizations and agencies. Associations with various agencies which provide services for families also contribute to the university instructional program for a variety of field work students.

Research

It is John Dewey who has been credited with including educational inquiry as a role for laboratory schools (McPherson & McGee, 1982). Until Dewey's perspective, the instructional function not only took precedence, but was also the differentiation between laboratories and public schools. In 1958, Alexander Frazier who was the Director of the University School at Ohio State, went a step further by stating that "our location and our nature are such that for us the research role, or at least the role of research leadership, must be considered primary" (p. 27).

The research function of child development/early childhood laboratories must be viewed as two-fold. Certainly because of the tie to academia, the laboratory must be a site for data collection and other primary research activity. The second part of this function is

frequently overlooked and under-utilized; the laboratory facility must strive to demonstrate practical application of relevant research findings.

Some broad categories of study in a laboratory setting include: areas of child development, both pre-service and in-service teacher education, program evaluation, parent education and action research. Action research may include evaluation of classroom practices, evaluation of advocacy efforts, effective administration and other areas relating specifically to the daily operation of the laboratory.

The application of research is essential in maintaining the laboratory as a place of scientific inquiry. When staff members can demonstrate their knowledge of current research by means of the children's environment, planning and implementing children's programs and communicating the purposes for such practice to parents and the community, it then is evident that there is a value placed on research.

In addition to the execution and application of quality research by well-trained, experienced members of the academic community, the laboratory is also a place for teaching about research. Students must be given opportunities to plan and implement research procedures under expert supervision in much the same manner as student teachers have typically practiced in laboratory settings.

The Future

It is imperative that each laboratory define its goals and objectives based on those of the larger institution.

For this reason, the three functions of instruction, service and research will be the necessary starting point for defining those goals. The agreement that all three must be included is not difficult to reach; however, the meaning and priority of those functions continues to be a source of debate among laboratory faculty, administration and staff. There does not seem to be a priority or protocol that is suited to each situation.

The laboratory must, however, take the leadership role in whichever priority it discerns as its primary function. Leadership in instruction was addressed by Dewey as long ago as 1902. Leadership in the service function differentiates laboratories from other types of child development/early childhood centers. Leadership in research must be demonstrated in application as well as in primary research activity.

Within the past twenty years, laboratory schools have decreased in number for a variety of reasons (Dishner & Boothby, 1986). A number of the remaining laboratories serve only young children. If child development/early childhood laboratories are to be viable tools in higher education the leadership responsibilities must be distinctly communicated to both campus administrators and to decision-making bodies.

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